In 1839, the Crichton opened its doors to its first psychiatric patients. More than 150 years on, the site is now home to a host of facilities ranging from a campus to a hotel. Mary Smith charts the history of this fascinating Dumfries institution.

Photography by Phi Rigby
Mention the Crichton to almost anyone in Dumfries & Galloway and they will have a tale to tell; either of family members who used to work there; memories of visiting relatives who were patients there; stories (not necessarily true) of famous people who have been treated there and, latterly, of people who have studied there. It is a Dumfries ‘institution’ in more ways than one.

Elizabeth Crichton initially wanted to use the legacy her late husband, Dr James Crichton, had left to found a university in Dumfries. He had returned from a lucrative career in India and bought Friars Carse, a country estate north of Dumfries. When he died he left around £100,000 (the equivalent of over £4 million today) for charitable purposes of his wife’s choosing. When the existing Scottish universities prevented her from carrying out her wishes, Elizabeth decided instead to build a lunatic asylum. This, too, met with strong opposition from the public and in the local press, not least for the “disproportionate magnitude” of the plans. But she was not to be thwarted a second time. In June 1839, The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette ran an advertisement informing its readers that The Crichton Institution for Lunatics, Dumfries, was open and receiving patients.

The advert made much of the asylum’s situation and fine views of Griffe and the Solway Firth, its extensive grounds and gardens and of how it would be run on the lines of “justice, benevolence and occupation”. Readers were assured that the attendants, whose duties were to “soothe, encourage, amuse, or employ”, had been chosen with great care. The description of the accommodation read almost like an advert for a superior hotel. For patients from the higher ranks of society, the accommodation included parlour and bedroom – “elegantly furnished” – and their meals included wines and seasonal game. Carriage driving was available, as were many other leisure pursuits such as piano, billiards and various outings. At the lower end of the social scale each pauper (there was, in the 19th century, no concern over the appropriate use of language – impoverished people were ‘paupers’ and people with mental health problems were ‘lunatics’) was to be given a separate bedroom and share a public room with 10 others. Soup was provided every day and meat three times a week, with the additional luxury of tea for the women and tobacco and beer for the “industrious males”.

All this seems a far cry from the popular image of the conditions in which mentally ill people were kept in the 19th century: a time when the ‘insane’ were objects of fear and ridicule, incarcerated in appalling conditions, often in chains, and when whipping and plunging into cold baths was believed to cure madness. These changes heralded a new approach in the treatment of mental health problems and the man who so strongly...
influenced those changes was Dr William Alexander Francis Browne, who had published a series of lectures under the title What Asylums Were, Are, and Ought to Be. Elizabeth Crichton was so impressed by his ideas that she immediately drove, in her yellow and black C-spring carriage, from Dumfries to the Montrose Royal Lunatic Asylum where he worked to offer him the post of resident medical superintendent at the Crichton. He was to be paid the not inconsiderable sum of £350 a year.

Dr Browne advocated what he called “moral treatment” in which the patient was treated as an individual. “Its secret,” he declared, “lies in two words – kindness and occupation.” What has come to be known as occupational therapy was then something completely radical. What was equally radical was Dr Browne’s determination that the presence of a well-trained staff would minimise, or even remove entirely, the need for physical and mechanical restraint. To improve the knowledge of the attendants, he introduced a series of nursing lectures – six years before Florence Nightingale started her training school in London.

Keeping the patient occupied to prevent “morbid thoughts” was a key to the new moral treatment; for the paupers there was work in the laundry, or as domestic servants, farm labourers or gardeners. Privileged patients could take regular carriage drives and there was lawn tennis, putting, bowling and picnics. Indoor pursuits included reading, drawing and painting, embroidery, concerts and theatricals.

The first theatrical performance ever to be given in a mental hospital took place at the Crichton in 1843. Raising the Wind, a farce by James Kenney, was produced entirely by the patients who also acted in it. Such proceedings, according to Dr Browne’s son, Sir James Crichton-Brown, himself an eminent psychiatrist “were looked at askance by Calvinistic circles in Dumfries. But the performance was under the immediate patronage of Mrs Crichton of Friars Carse, and the Minister of St Michael’s Church… Dr Wallace, who was on the Board of Directors at the time; so that settled the matter.”

The original playbill remains among the Crichton’s extensive archive, along with what survives of patients’ artwork from those early years.

Recently retired archivist Morag Williams, writing in her History of Crichton Royal Hospital, which was published to commemorate the hospital’s 150th anniversary in 1989, says: “One can only regret the loss of almost all of the work by a professional Cumbrian landscape artist, who earlier in his career illustrated some early editions of Scott’s Waverley Novels.”

Morag probably knows more than anyone about the history of the Crichton asylum. Formerly a secondary school history teacher,
she took a break until her children started school before returning to work. After some time as a supply teacher she decided on a change: “In 1983 I took up a one-year part-time, temporary post as archivist cataloguing the Crichton artefacts and early patients’ library. Although the post was always part-time it became a permanent one and I ended up staying for 26 years.

The books she initially dealt with belonged to the oldest mental health hospital library in Scotland.

“Dr Browne started it in 1839. He appealed to the public to donate books and compiled a catalogue, printed in 1853, making use of a patient who had been a printer by trade. When I started work, the books were scattered all over the place; in Easterbrook Hall above the swimming pool [which had been used for hydrotherapy] and below the stage and in the damp crypt of the church,” says Morag.

She was also responsible for establishing a museum, which told the story of the Crichton Royal Hospital (it received the ‘Royal’ status a year after opening). The museum was situated in a wing of Easterbrook Hall until the Crichton Development Company required the premises. “The general manager, Will Armour, was in favour of a museum being established and Easterbrook Hall was chosen in 1988 with a view to opening the museum in 1989 for the 150th anniversary,” Morag explains.

“The health board management wrote to the Lord Lieutenant of Dumfriesshire asking if Prince Charles would open the museum and I received a phone call in February 1989 from Will saying that if the museum could be ready in six weeks we could have Prince Charles. Chris Lyon and the works department generally applied themselves wholeheartedly. John Taylor, manager of Solway Industrial Unit, prepared the captions and arranged the framing of many pictures.

“We worked all hours with lots of volunteers helping. At night, after the canteen closed at 9pm, it was really creepy; lots of creaks and groans. I used to bring my dog to be with me when I was working late. Miss Marion Paterson, head of occupational therapy, and Miss Christian Paterson, director of nursing services (midwifery) had great hand working skills, useful in the preparation of information boards. It was the 50th anniversary of Cresswell the same year so we had special showcases prepared by Dr George Gordon of the maternity hospital.

“We finished at 2pm on Thursday, April 6, and Prince Charles was due at 3pm. It was a pouring wet day but the visit went off quite successfully. He had no idea of the last minute preparations that had gone on.”

Prince Charles’ visit to open the museum was also Morag’s first, but not the last, experience of sniffer dogs brought along in advance of the Prince’s arrival.

“The dog kept going back to the
Patients from the higher ranks of society had comfortable accommodation, such as this lady's sitting room.

- Cresswell display case and the handlers asked if I could explain why,” she says. “It turned out that when preparing the display, Dr Gordon had broken a phial of amyl nitrate and it must have seeped into the wood.

“The occasion an ‘inmate’ was once overheard to remark: “You can scarcely recognise our own people from the rest.”

As well as establishing the library, Dr Browne also encouraged patients to write for the New Moon, a monthly literary journal which was produced until 1937. In Morag’s History of Crichton Royal Hospital, she says: “This monthly magazine was so profitable that by 1846 a printing press was purchased from the profits, as were some fresh stocks for the library.”

New Moon contained stories, essays, poems and lists of the various entertainments patients took part in, including the annual Christmas Ball at which many of the great and the good of the county mingled with those patients well enough to attend. On one occasion an ‘inmate’ was once overheard to remark: “You can scarcely recognise our own people from the rest.”

Among the patients who found asylum at the Crichton were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s father; the daughter of artist Helen Allingham and her poet husband William; and Angus Mackay, who became Queen Victoria’s official piper. He published his Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd or Highland Pipe Music in 1838 and it soon became a standard work. By 1853 he had become ‘insane’ and was transferred to the Crichton from Bethlem Hospital in London. During an attempted escape in 1859 he drowned in the River Nith.

Rumours abound of other well-known figures being patients in more recent times, but on those Morag retains a discreet silence. Records are not available for public perusal until 75 years after the death of a patient.

Over the years, the Crichton expanded considerably and at one point extended to some 1,000 acres. It had its own water supply and power station and with its own farm and gardens it was almost self-sufficient. It gained an international reputation and throughout its history was at the forefront of what Morag describes in her book as “the psychiatric revolution”. Dr Willi Mayer-Gross, a refugee from Heidelberg University in Germany, became director of clinical research from 1939 to 1954, at a time when new therapies were being tried and tested: insulin coma therapy, electro-convulsive therapy and pre-frontal leucotomy, and the introduction of drug therapies which were to change the face of psychiatric treatment.

Morag gives brief accounts of all those changes in her book and in a postscript records how ‘off-site’ developments with the new emphasis on care in the community led to emptying houses on the Crichton site.

It may seem unfair to Dr Browne’s successors to dwell so much on those early days of the Crichton Royal, but the archives show that he was very much at the forefront of new, enlightened ways of treating mental illness. Even today, so many years later, a sense of wonder and excitement remains at what he set out to do. He laid the foundations on which others could build.

Although officially ‘retired’ Morag finds it much to meet the needs of pauper patients with the building of a separate asylum – the Southern Counties – in 1849.

Expansion: Under Dr James Rutherford, superintendent from 1883-1907, and continued by Dr Charles Easterbrook (1908-1937) a huge programme of expansion took place with the building of Browne, Rutherford, Eskdale, Nithsdale, Carmont, Annandale houses and Easterbrook Hall. The Southern Counties was demolished and the hospice built on its site. A three-department system kept the upper, middle and lower classes separate.

NHS: On July 5, 1948 the Crichton became part of the National Health Service. The three-department system became one with Dr McCowan as physician superintendent. May Houliston became the matron of the entire hospital.

Final: With the introduction of new psychotropic drugs the number of patients requiring long-term hospitalisation was reduced and the growth of care in the community saw the gradual emptying of wards and the Crichton, eventually, began a whole new era as university campus and business park.
items have been retained on the site. Church – to which end some large and special one day a new interpretation centre will be set in 1990 – is a huge loss. There are hopes that closure of the museum – which won an award indeed, was made an Honorary Research museum were an invaluable resource. Morag, the history of the Crichton, the archives in the Dumfries Campus undertook research into students from the University of Glasgow's after the Crichton's collection of furniture. people tracing their relatives, she even looked the museum and conducting research for ever alike for Morag and as well as running the Barony, Logan Gardens and to a couple of arranged for Girija to send some cuttings to Kirkmahoe where Morag lives. Morag amazingly enough, a great granddaughter in New Zealand and one in Carlisle; and helped the couple track two great grandsons, his son and grandson were both GPs in Langholm,” says Morag, who was able to help the couple track two great grandsons, one in New Zealand and one in Carlisle; and Morag arranged for Girija to send some cuttings to the Barony, Logan Gardens and to a couple of rose experts, and she is crossing her fingers that they grow. In her role as archivist, no two days were ever alike for Morag and as well as running the museum and conducting research for people tracing their relatives, she even looked after the Crichton’s collection of furniture.

When a group of 4th year Honours students from the University of Glasgow’s Dumfries Campus undertook research into the history of the Crichton, the archives in the museum were an invaluable resource. Morag, indeed, was made an Honorary Research Fellow by Professor Rex Taylor and the 2004 closure of the museum – which won an award in 1990 – is a huge loss. There are hopes that one day a new interpretation centre will be set up – possibly in the crypt of the Crichton Church – to which end some large and special items have been retained on the site.

“Despite the difficulties of meeting archival storage criteria that would be encountered, I should like to see Solway House, a very attractive, spacious A-listed building, converted for use as Dumfries Archive Centre,” says Morag. “There is a car park just outside the building and many of the would-be users are already on site.”

In the meantime the Health Board archives are held in the archive centre on Burns Street, Dumfries and can be viewed by appointment by calling 01387 269254.

Morag has also written several histories of hospitals in the region including Cresswell; Thomas Hope Hospital in Langholm; Kirkcudbright; Moffat; Garrick Hospital in Stranraer; Lochmaben, and Thornhill.

“I’m also very proud to have written Mrs Crichton’s entry in the Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women,” Morag says. “I have a lot of admiration for what she did. In her prayer of blessing for the building she described herself as weak and feeble – something she definitely was not.”

One-hundred-and-seventy years after she first proposed a university for Dumfries, Elizabeth Crichton’s vision came true. Now, there are not only one, but two universities with the addition of a college of further education on the site.

To learn more about the Crichton complex as it is today, and the Crichton Development Company’s ambitious plans for its future, read Mary Smith’s following two features on Gordon Mann of the Crichton Trust, and Professor David Clark, director of the University of Glasgow's Dumfries Campus.

The might of Elizabeth Crichton

Elizabeth Crichton (1779-1862) was the daughter of Sir Robert Grierson of Lag and Rockhall. In 1819 she married Dr James Crichton who had spent several years in China and then India, where he was physician to the Governor General.

Dr Crichton also had business interests which some have suggested may have included an involvement in the opium trade. Mrs Crichton, however, denied such rumours, maintaining: “The rewards of his labours were acquired solely by the great blessing of God upon his honest industry.”

Elizabeth wanted to use her husband’s fortune to bring a university to Dumfries but Scotland’s existing universities blocked the idea and the legacy was used for a mental hospital instead. Little is known about what she was like as a person, though given how she battled to use her husband’s legacy as she saw fit, she must have been a very determined woman.

Elizabeth’s godson, Sir James Crichton-Browne, son of Dr Browne, the first medical superintendent at the Crichton, describes her in his foreword to The Chronicle of Crichton Royal, as “a prim little lady in a black gown with a frilled collar and frilled widow’s cap… genial and kindly withal, highly intelligent and well-informed… I recall picnics she arranged at Friars Carse when parties of patients were hospitably entertained and personally conducted to Burns’ hermitage…”

In 2000 Prince Charles unveiled a bronze statue of Elizabeth by sculptors Bill Scott and John Brazenall, which stands in the Crichton grounds close to the church. A fascinating account of Elizabeth’s fight to establish the Crichton Asylum is told by Alexandrina Anderson in Crichton University: A Widow’s Might. The book, priced £6 (plus £1.50 p&p) is available from the Crichton Foundation or the Savings Banks Museum in Ruthwell. See www.crichtonfoundation.org/shop.asp and www.savingsbanksmuseum.co.uk/education.html.